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SUBJECT: CHIEF RABBI PRAISES GOT, BUT ANTI-SEMITISM A
GROWING CONCERN

¶1. Summary and Comment: During a November 3 farewell call by the Ambassador on Chief Rabbi Isak Haleva and the leadership of the Jewish Community, Haleva expounded on the good relations maintained between the Jewish community and the Government of Turkey (GOT) on national and local levels, but also lamented a discernible rise of anti-Semitism among the Turkish people. He noted that programs designed to introduce Muslim clerics and theologians to Judaism have been successful at improving impressions of Jews and one participant will become the Mufti of Istanbul. End Summary.

Continued Positive Relations with the GOT

¶2. Citing a history of cooperation with the state and state officials, Rabbi Haleva said that relations have improved to an unprecedented level under the AKP government. "When there is an ear that listens to you," he said, "you feel filled with hope." He compared the Jewish community's relationship with the government to that of a marriage in which arguments occur but in which the common sentiment is positive. In fact, Jewish community president Sylvio Ovadya said that two years ago the Jewish community opened a synagogue in the Istanbul suburb of Kemerburgaz. Unlike the experience of Christians and churches in Turkey, Ovadya said generally it is not difficult to open a new synagogue. "We simply asked the kaymakam (district governor) and he provided permission."

¶3. Ovadya said that the Jewish community has gained importance in Turkey as more Turkish politicians meet with members of the "Jewish lobby" during their visits to the United States. He also suggested that the AKP may seek closer relationships with minority communities within Turkey to avoid criticism due to their overarching Islamic identity. Ovadya explained that the Jewish community has close relations with the Fetullah Gulen group in Istanbul, as well as with other Islamic groups that are much more open to dialogue than they were 20 years ago. Ovadya attributed this openness in part to the AKP's willingness to communicate with other religious populations. Rabbi Haleva emphasized that "we couldn't have anticipated such good relations" with the ruling party.

Less Favorable Relations with Turkish People

¶4. Rabbi Haleva contended that in the Ottoman Empire, minorities had even more rights than Muslim Ottoman citizens, but "it would be the end of the world" if the Turkish public perceived such a situation today. "Now we are like acrobats, keeping a balance to keep everyone happy." Noting that anti-Semitism continues to be widespread in Turkey, he said he perceived a troubling increase in the past few years.

¶5. According to Rabbi Haleva, the misrepresentation of the

Arab-Israeli conflict causes more damage to the Jewish community and the Muslim world than any other concern. "Phrasing the conflict as a religious conflict forces individuals to take sides and stains history in a very significant way." Rabbi Haleva said that such a skewed representation of the situation has heightened his community's struggle with anti-Semitism in Turkey.

¶6. Vice president of the Jewish community Sami Herman emphasized that while the community has good relationships with the upper levels of political and religious society, the Turkish people demonstrate that they are more anti-Semitic than ever before. The Ambassador suggested that the Jewish community should take advantage of the opportunity presented by a group of scholars invited by the Diyanet for a reciprocal visit from the United States in the coming year. The Ambassador noted that an arranged conversation with the community and the group could go far.

¶7. Rabbi Haleva related his experience in leading 18 theology professors to the Israel ten years ago in a program funded by the Turkish government. All of the participants now have favorable impressions of Jews, and one of them will be the next Mufti of Istanbul.

WIENER